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## Emergency politics and the middlebrow novel: A comparative analysis of Han Suyin's ... *and the Rain my Drink* and Mary McMinnies's *The Flying Fox*

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### ABSTRACT

In July 1956, Han Suyin's novel of the Malayan Emergency was published in London and Singapore. ... *and the Rain my Drink* is a fictional account of the communist insurgency and the British counter-insurgency campaign. What is often overlooked is that earlier that year the British author Mary McMinnies had published her "Emergency" novel *The Flying Fox*, which covers much of the same political ground as Han's. This article views Han's and McMinnies's work as exemplars of middlebrow fiction. To narrate the end of empire, both texts employ literary devices associated with the middlebrow, alongside exotic imagery familiar from an earlier imperial tradition. Han's narrative choices acquire, however, distinctive meanings in the Malayan context, associating the exotic with Malaya's multi-ethnic political landscape, and the domestic tropes of the middlebrow with societal tensions and a newfound Asian confidence, whilst also revealing Asian sensitivities and imported western values.

### KEYWORDS

Malayan Emergency; hearts and minds; middlebrow; the exotic; domestic tropes; Asian nationalism

In July 1956, Han Suyin's novel of the Malayan Emergency was published in London and Singapore. ... *and the Rain my Drink* is a fictional account of the communist insurgency, set around the time of Sir Gerald Templer's arrival as Director of Operations, and the subsequent reinvigoration of the British "hearts and minds" campaign. Few critics have mentioned that earlier that year the British author Mary McMinnies had published her "Emergency" novel, *The Flying Fox*, which covers much of the same political ground. Widely praised in the western press for the documentary quality of their fiction, Han and McMinnies use the medium of the novel to engage western readers in a debate on the politics of decolonization.

This article argues that besides illustrating the engagement of post-war novelists with decolonization – thus contesting earlier critical views of public disengagement with the empire (Porter 2004, 319)<sup>1</sup> – Han's and McMinnies's work can also be viewed as exemplars of middlebrow fiction (Humble 2001). It suggests that both authors conduct their political argument within a literary category frequently associated with women's domestic interests and private anxieties. Although middlebrow novelists are often viewed as conservative in their approach to form and content, recent academic work has shown

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that they do not refrain from stylistic experimentation (Hammill 2007, 6) or from challenging the status quo (Humble 2001, 256). Building on this scholarship, this article proposes that the middlebrow allows for the expression of controversial views on decolonization – in this instance, Han’s and McMinnies’s critical, if at times ambivalent, stance on the British “hearts and minds” campaign.

Covering the years 1952–53 during the Malayan Emergency, . . . *and the Rain my Drink* recounts both the British efforts to contain the insurgency and the struggle of those caught by its regulations and interventions. The novel also exposes the squalor of the New Villages (the resettlement camps established by the British for those suspected of communist sympathies) and the indifference of those in charge to the human suffering. Chief amongst its vast cast of characters is Ah Mei, a young Chinese communist, who has been taken prisoner and now serves as an informant to the British. It is later revealed that Ah Mei has kept her communist connections and has betrayed all her comrades apart from her lover Sen. Ultimately, she betrays him too and marries a fellow communist-turned-informant.

A distinguishing characteristic of . . . *and the Rain my Drink* is the alternation between the first-person voice of a fictional Dr Han and that of the omniscient third-person narrator (Lee 2014). The former takes us into elite colonial society, as Dr Han attends parties held by the Chinese businessman Quo Boon, visits the British police officer Luke Davis at his headquarters, and joins British and Malay officials on an inspection visit to the New Village Todak. Dr Han’s voice critiques the British approach, citing “[t]he muddles of ignorance, the suspicions based on race, the heavy hand of Emergency Regulations” (Han 1956, 112). It also acknowledges the complexity of Malayan politics: “Is not so much of what happens in this country a reciprocal confusion, rooted in ignorance of each other’s language and customs, producing blindness, intolerant inhumanity?” (36). Lee (2014, 3) suggests that while the omniscient narrator produces historical objectivity by portraying a wide range of characters, the first-person voice helps validate the authenticity of the historical account.

McMinnies’s debut novel *The Flying Fox* describes a small British community in an imaginary Malayan town. Colonial Telebu is depicted as an unattractive and run-down place, peopled by very ordinary characters – “U.K. thrown-outs imported annually” (McMinnies [1956] 1962, 228) – who have come to this distant outpost of the British Empire “to do an honest job of work in return for the obvious perks – nothing grand” (229). It is the site of multiple tensions between husbands and wives, Europeans and Eurasians, British officials, and Malayan Chinese towkay. The Emergency features not only as background to a story of local corruption, with a British police officer uncovering evidence of rice being smuggled into the jungle, but it is also the subject of explicit commentary by an ambivalent third-person narrator, who expresses support for the war against the “bandits” while pointing to the inhumanity of the British tactics: “If they could not be bombed or shelled out of the jungle, they could be starved out” (34).

*The Flying Fox* offers a commentary, too, on Malaya’s history of ethnic tension. Expressing the view that in their absence, “this really appalling racial conflict [ ... ] could go off like a load of dynamite” (McMinnies [1956] 1962, 230), McMinnies’s British characters are dismissive of efforts to build a multi-ethnic nation. They also revert to racial stereotypes that serve to legitimize colonial rule. Meanwhile, the novel’s Chinese characters are depicted as caught between their business interests – serving the

Europeans in Telebu and running lucrative contracts in the New Villages – and their support for the insurgents in the jungle.

Both novels were written by outsiders in late colonial Malaya – Han, a Belgian Chinese, western-educated doctor married to a British Special Branch officer, and McMinnies, the India-born British wife of an official employed on General Templer’s “hearts and minds” campaign. The narratives provide a comprehensive picture of the Emergency, covering many of the factors that would make up Malaya’s unique path to independence. They offer a critical assessment of British post-war rule in Malaya and challenge the rhetoric that promoted the idea of Britain’s successful handling of the Emergency. They further portray Malayan society as fragmented and present a sceptical perspective on the British belief that the colonial power could help shape a multiracial Malayan national identity in preparation for independence. As such, the novels highlight key themes that would feature in later historiography of the Emergency (Hack 1999; Harper 1999). But there are interesting differences between the texts too, which appear in their respective choices of narrative tropes, and come to the fore when the novels are read through a middlebrow lens.

### The middlebrow novel: Readers and aesthetics

“The middlebrow” is a controversial concept, but there is broad agreement amongst literary critics that it applies to fiction that appeals to a middle-class reading public (Humble 2001, 12). The term first appeared in British newspapers in the 1920s and was used throughout the interwar period by contemporary commentators and literary critics. It described forms of fiction that were neither “highbrow” (formally challenging avant-garde literature), nor “lowbrow” (popular and mass culture). Its emergence coincided with changes in book publishing and selling, in turn a response to the newly developing reading tastes of an expanding middle class, which was more educated, able to afford leisure time, and keen to expand its cultural horizons (37–38).

In recent years, literary scholars have usefully expanded the concept from its earlier negative association with intellectually unchallenging fiction largely aimed at middle-class women, to encompass the interests of a broader reading public. Hence, the middlebrow came to be viewed as a critical category, defined both by its relationship with its readership, and the shared formal and thematic characteristics that reflect the tastes and concerns of these readers. Further, whilst most critics have studied the middlebrow novel of the interwar years, more recently some have started to employ the concept in the post-war context. For instance, as well as being seen in terms of women’s anxieties about changing gender roles and middle-class uncertainties about new class identities, the concept has been applied to describe Cold War fiction, and middlebrow engagement with the uncertain post-war political landscape. Christina Klein (2003), for example, has focused on sentimental narratives of east–west relationships, which foreground a discourse of integration, or Cold War orientalism (14–15).<sup>2</sup>

In her study of literary taste and middle-class desire, Janice Radway (1997) suggests that middlebrow fiction derives much of its appeal from its ability to offer the reader a cognitive and emotional education, alongside the pleasure of becoming immersed in an interesting and exciting plot (7). Engagement with the fictional text may help readers understand the wider external world and instruct them “in the proper stance to assume

with respect to the world” and “ways of feeling appropriate to that stance” (263). Familiar narrative elements – a satisfying plot, engaging characters, and sympathetic narrators – can facilitate this process.

Discussions of middlebrow writing further highlight the role of mimesis and intertextuality in producing a familiar context and the expectation that some kind of order will prevail. Middlebrow fiction shares some of these characteristics with more popular cultural forms, but differs in that it is more attuned to middle-class interests (Holmes 2018, 30). However, the middlebrow novel can also upset readers’ expectations when it departs from established narrative conventions and introduces unresolved plots, unreliable narrators, or unexpected variants on familiar intertexts. For this reason, Diana Holmes (2018) argues that the middlebrow negotiates between “the satisfactions of coherence and pleasing design” and acknowledgement of a chaotic, contingent reality (23).

Drawing on this scholarship, Chris Bongie (2008) takes the concept of the middlebrow to the writing of postcolonial authors. Reading modern Caribbean fiction, Bongie coins the term “postcolonial middlebrow”. This type of writing, he suggests, combines writerly ambition and readerly pleasure, thereby creating hybrid texts, which contain detail about everyday practices and material conditions that appeal to local readerships and to western audiences with an interest in the “foreign novel” (290–291). Bongie further highlights the tension that can emerge in the postcolonial middlebrow as its authors create an element of familiarity by working within much-liked genres (such as the romance), whilst at the same time destabilizing the expectations of mainstream readers – for example, by subverting colonial intertexts (302).

### The middlebrow and the exotic

The reader of middlebrow fiction thus expects both generic and thematic familiarity, yet is interested in learning more about the wider world. With this didactic function in mind, contemporary reviewers of the late colonial novel often allude to the authors’ imperial background and their intimate knowledge of social and political life in the colonies. This interest in authenticity hails back to an earlier imperial literary tradition; many novelists of the imperial period were concerned to educate their British readers, both at home and abroad, and were willing to provide the exotic tales their audiences demanded (Parry 1972, 92).

The exotic was a mainstay of imperial fiction and an integral part of colonial discourse and the power relations it supported (Said 1995, 87–88). Working through familiar colonial tropes (such as the jungle and the hunt) or stereotypical portrayals of colonial characters (such as the silent servant), the exotic relies on a common set of organizing metaphors and helps the colonizer make sense – and seek control – of the unknown (Boehmer 2005, 51–52). When used in the late colonial novel, the exotic continues to act as a literary device that translates the unfamiliar into something more familiar and creates intertextual linkages with earlier imperial fiction. The exotic also contributes to the ambivalence of colonial texts and the instability of colonial discourse, as it “oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity” (Huggan 2001, 13). It domesticates the foreign, making it familiar and comprehensible, yet never achieves complete familiarity or predictability (14).

In recent decades, the success of (in particular diasporic) Asian authors has drawn critical attention to the position of the exotic in the global marketplace and the burden placed on postcolonial writers to respond to (or anticipate) the tastes of their western readers. Viewed as “translators and exemplars of their own ‘authentically’ exotic cultures”, postcolonial writers may be tempted to transform diversity into “a reassuringly familiar aesthetic cast” (Huggan 2001, 26–27). Set against this, the author retains the ability to manipulate the conventions of the exotic to their own political ends (32). Lisa Lau (2009) uses the term “re-Orientalism” to describe the representation of the east by contemporary Asian writers who deploy a discourse reminiscent of orientalism (572). Adopting the west as their central reference point, these writers often reduce the representation of the east to a set of stereotypes and generalizations, in the process importing inherited colonial paradigms of power (Lau and Mendes 2014, 4). Yet here too, a diversity of practices may emerge, as re-orientalism can generate sites of subversion and unstable meanings that expose the workings of orientalism (1). Whilst these scholars focus on late-20th- and early-21st-century fiction, the trade-off they highlight between meeting and challenging readers’ expectations is similar to the flexibility ascribed to mid-century middlebrow novels. The remainder of this article explores how Han and McMinnies approach this trade-off and combine the tropes of the exotic and the domestic to bring the familiar world of the middlebrow reader into an unfamiliar colonial arena.

### Narrating a distant conflict: The exotic

In December 1990, Han Suyin gave a plenary lecture at a conference devoted to the Asian novel in English. Reflecting on the role of the Asian writer, Han remarked:

When both ideas and reality are foreign to his audience, the writer has an added burden – that of making accepted and universal what is strange and esoteric, that of making accepted and familiar what is repulsive and rejected. By converting into starkness, realism, what his audience regarded as unthreatening exoticism, the writer disturbs, profanes, foists a new nakedness upon those piously clad in the phantasms of conformity. (1991, 17)

Han is aware that Asian writers must overcome established stereotypes and clichés as they mediate between the colonial past and the postcolonial future (21). Her observation also points to the role of the exotic in the representation of Asian experiences to an anglophone audience. Characterizing the exotic as caught in an unstable relationship that can be manipulated by the writer, Han hints at its ambivalence, both in terms of its meaning and effect on the reader. When referring to “unthreatening exoticism”, she is implying the ability of the exotic to make sense of the unknown – for example, through the depiction of the colonial garden and the jungle.

In the first instance, the jungle in . . . *and the Rain my Drink* is a political contact zone, representing terrorism and sabotage to the British officials, and the prospect of liberation to “the People Inside” (Han 1956, 54).<sup>3</sup> To the young Chinese terrorist who has been taken prisoner, the jungle promises eventual freedom: “Once we have thrown the British out, we can be free, I can be a doctor” (40). In contrast, for police officer Luke Davis, it signifies the weakening of British authority and his own growing unease about his



mission: “And thus doubt was with him, as the smell and feel of jungle putrefaction attends the birth of new plant life” (164).

Throughout Han Suyin’s text, the jungle is a highly unstable trope. At times, her use of the exotic is, as might be expected, a metaphor for the ever-present threat to British imperial authority, as well as for the cognitive failure of the western ruler (and reader):

The jungle was never far. Not for Luke Davis. Others might lose it, forget it in a room like this one, looking through the black square of windows into a sky now gorgeously studded with gem-like stars, feeling only the marble underfoot. But the jungle was here, at the back of the minds of every one present. (Han 1956, 80)

But perhaps unexpectedly, it is also connected with the British military response:

Barbed wire is incorporate to the land, another vegetation. [ ... ] It encloses the resettlement areas, where six hundred thousand ex-farmers now live. Thickened to triple depth and height, it bristles with the watchtowers of detention camps, loops around the police posts, straggles up and down labour lines and factories [ ... ] Unseen from the air barbed wire delimits the jungle, the front line palisades of its retreat. Barbed wire fences the clearings where man survives, and outside it is the grey-green toppling surge, all-engulfing, of the jungle. (114)

Here the image is adapted to signify British counter-resistance, with jungle and resettlement camps merging into a single image of barbed wire as another vegetation. Within the broader narrative, the trope represents both the extent of British control – by 1953, New Villages had been established across the Malayan peninsula – and its tenuous hold on its indigenous population, for whom the jungle represents not a war, but a “womblike perpetuity” (175) where “true justice” has its own laws (178). A similar ambivalence can be detected when the fictional Dr Han uses jungle imagery to describe chaotic night-time scenes in the local hospital:

At night, the Hospital, already vast by day, becomes enormous, a fantasy of disproportion. All the public buildings are of prodigious size, as if giants had planned to work in them. [ ... ] Walking the corridor at night I am filled with panic, that I shall never reach its end. While pacing thus I have felt unreal, as if life had lost meaning, as if, at the bottom, living was only that, the walking of one long night-filled corridor, the treading of an endless, shallow, dark ravine [ ... ]. There is only repetitious exuberance, the raw undiluted essence of growth. (33)

Here too, Han Suyin appears to be working within the western literary tradition, as the image expresses the confusion and inertia she herself had encountered as a newcomer to Malaya (Han 1980, 57). But it also acquires an anti-establishment meaning, conveying the author’s concern with the inequalities she observed in Malayan society, as in this jungle-hospital the patients are “forced in the cleft between two magics, the new and the old” (35) and caught in “a comedy of errors due to this division between the ruler and the ruled” (36).<sup>4</sup>

Thus far, Han’s use of the exotic mode appears to fit within an earlier imperial tradition, denoting both the limits of the imperial power’s attempt to control the unknowable east and the (partly hidden) anti-imperial resistance. Yet, in a significant departure from this literary tradition, Han modifies the imagery to describe the specificities of the Malayan conflict and the lived experience of Malaya’s ethnic minorities. Specifically, the jungle trope is used by Dr Han to denounce the British government’s divide-and-rule policy and to highlight the barriers to full political participation



experienced by the Malayan Chinese: “there was no door to the future for them, save through the green mouth of the jungle” (Han 1956, 40). The jungle is associated too with the commercial success enjoyed by the Malayan Chinese business community: “the ravenous, stupid, loud brash jungle of money-making” (261). But it also conceals the son “whose name Quo Boon never uttered now” (256) and who is none other than Comrade Sen. Hence, the jungle becomes a symbol of the divided loyalties of the Malayan Chinese, associated with the hard work and the political frustrations of an earlier generation, and the social and political aspirations of the younger. As such, the exotic comes to stand for Malaya’s complex political affairs, which the various ethnic parties cannot bring to a satisfactory conclusion, at least at the time of the novel’s narrative (Harper 1999, 258–259, 352).

In a similar fashion, McMinnies employs the exotic in *The Flying Fox* to describe a distant colonial war in an alien setting. In the first instance, and in common with . . . and the Rain my Drink, the jungle refers to the political contact zone where British soldiers are engaged in an unequal battle against an invisible enemy: “A funny war, no doubt about it, a war waged against shadows” (McMinnies [1956] 1962, 34). It exists as a political metaphor too, used to cast doubt on the British military strategy:

For the jungle had a ruthless way with expensive modern weapons, and discounted many of them; shadows in the jungle were no reasonable target for bombers nor yet for artillery. Green troops, however, superior in numbers, created a problem of their own, because the jungle itself unnerved young Europeans bred to an office desk, a factory bench. It was a snipers’ war. (34)

Largely working through an omniscient – and at times ironic – third-person narrator, McMinnies uses the image of the jungle to criticize both local support for the insurgents and the ineffectiveness of the British counter-insurgency response: “a proportion of the rice unloaded at Telebu jetty under the very noses of the Customs and the auspices of Rice Merchants’ Incorporated found its way into the jungle” (35). As such, the jungle has become an ambivalent symbol, a device to condemn both sides in the conflict.

In the second instance, the exotic conveys the loss of imperial confidence and the diminished ambitions of those serving in post-war Malaya. Colonial Telebu is a place defined by squalor and decay:<sup>5</sup>

All day, the sun makes free with the town; licks up the mud when the tide has sucked the river-water from the monsoon drains which line the streets, and by noon has laid bare the bones of the refuse; then pouncing on the tin cans, prawn husks, dead rats, sodden fruit-rinds, picks them dry and shifts on. (McMinnies [1956] 1962, 9)

It is also used to highlight the debris left behind by the colonial enterprise. Hinting at the economic and social inequalities that underpin the colonial economy, McMinnies admits the damaging impact of imperialism. This is succinctly captured in an image of the “coolie mail [which] lumbered down the line, the third-class carriages teeming with Indian labour, then giant logs of teak, mahogany, then latex drums” (149). This is not an overt critique of economic practices – readers are left to draw their own conclusions – but the image has the potential to destabilize a narrative supportive of Britain’s commercial interests.

Hence, both authors adopt and adapt familiar exotic tropes to express imperial anxieties, while mounting a critique of British counter-insurgency policy. *The Flying Fox* is primarily a British-oriented account of the Emergency, albeit a critical one, and to the extent that the exotic contains an element of ambivalence, it is a British ambivalence. In contrast, the multiplicity of the exotic mode encountered in . . . *and the Rain my Drink* describes a wider range of perspectives, representing Malaya's complex internal ethnic politics, whilst also hinting at the difficulties involved in the transition towards a multiracial independent nation. Han (1980) would return to the image of the jungle in her autobiography, both to describe the threat of the insurgents and to voice her misgivings about the British response.

Han's commitment to "making accepted and universal what is strange and esoteric, that of making accepted and familiar what is repulsive and rejected" relates the exotic to the expectations of the reader, a key theme of middlebrow scholarship. Yet, as Han and McMinnies depart from the colonial intertext and assign unfamiliar meanings to the tropes of the exotic, the reader is not given the "unthreatening exotic" they may have expected.<sup>6</sup> As shown next, both authors complement the exotic with a series of domestic tropes familiar to the metropolitan middlebrow reader that may help explain the distant colonial conflict.

### Exposing tensions in colonial society: The domestic

In the final chapters of . . . *and the Rain my Drink*, Han draws a series of sketches detailing the influence of western consumer culture on the domestic lives of Quo Boon and his family. These range from the mundane – "breakfast on a small table on the veranda, a fried egg, a piece of toast, and some Kellogg's cornflakes" (Han 1956, 244) – to the luxurious: "the expensive Swiss alarm clock on the rosewood carved side-table" (240–241). Emphasizing what she saw as the Chinese preoccupation with social status – "without money a man was nothing" (242) – Han employs familiar middlebrow markers of taste and social standing, in the process revealing the marginal position of the Malayan Chinese community: "the Overseas Chinese wield wealth but not power, remain at the mercy of officialdom and political change" (242). Details of domesticity also expose British self-interest and ignorance, with Todak resettlement officer Tommy Uxbridge reducing his assignment to "pensions, cost of living, and expatriate allowances" (123), confident that "all would again be fine in the colonial garden" (124).

Han's concern with middle-class tastes and social aspirations is a distinguishing feature of metropolitan middlebrow fiction (Humble 2001, 256) and can usefully be understood in the context of Pierre Bourdieu's (2010) theoretical work on taste and cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, middlebrow taste is located between "legitimate" and "popular taste" (*le gout moyen*) and brings together the minor works of the major arts and the major works of the minor arts, producing work that appeals to middle-class consumers, as it combines accessibility and cultural legitimacy (8). Bourdieu further notes that despite their reverential attitude towards legitimate culture, the middle-class consumer frequently lacks knowledge or guidelines to appreciate these works of art, leading to anxiety and discomfort, because "legitimate culture is not made for him (and is often made against him), so that he is not made for it" (328). Applying Bourdieu's insights to female English writing of the 1920s–1950s, Nicola Humble

(2001, 59) suggests that the middlebrow novel displays a self-consciousness and a preoccupation with class identity, which captures the middle-class reader's own discomfort. The novel also helps its readers (often belonging to the lower middle class) forge a new middle-class identity, by affirming the cultural superiority of the upper middle class, while ensuring that its codes are available to all (88–89). In a similar vein, Janice Radway (1997, 297–298) argues that American middlebrow fiction of the 1950s and 1960s explicitly targets those aspiring to inclusion in the ranks of the new post-war professional elite.

A useful framework with which to understand the middlebrow's relationship with its middle-class reading public, and the utility and pleasure those readers derive from the middlebrow text, Bourdieu's typology has been criticized, with literary scholars noting that it permits insufficient appreciation of dissonant tastes within classes or overlapping tastes across classes. Instead, critics of the middlebrow encourage us to read the middlebrow as historically and ideologically contingent texts, which engage their readers in a wider societal debate and are "highly subtle and flexible, continually negotiating changing social structures and ideologies, balancing conservatism and radicalisms in order to both consolidate and question the new class and gender identities of its readers" (Humble 2001, 256).

In . . . *and the Rain my Drink*, Han produces a similar debate about class and taste, but extends it to reveal divisions in Malayan society, as well as underlying power relationships. As an example, differences in clothing are used to describe the brash confidence of the English women "in flowery dresses, speaking intently and in an accumulation of high-pitched voices", the quiet confidence of wealthy Chinese women "in long Chinese dresses with high collars. [ ... ] These smiled into infinity, not bothering to talk or to move", and the reserve of Malay women, who "with the long flowing tunics of Johore hiding their slim bodies sat together, nervously holding hands" (Han 1956, 71–72). Elsewhere, Han uses food and custom – further staples of middlebrow fiction – to highlight different cultural sensitivities:

In the middle of our table lay on a silver dish the brandy-coloured roast suckling pig indispensable to a proper feast, its snout turned towards us, its tail stuck out at the other end. Maxine exclaimed: "Isn't it SWEET . . . poor little thing!" The Malay gentleman politely sipped orange juice. He did not eat, all the food was contaminated with pork; but he was Quo Boon's friend, and came to lend his presence, and had eaten at home before coming. (74)

In a further illustration of Han's independent use of western tropes, the domestic acquires a political meaning, with Ah Mei's hairstyle (a European-looking "permanent wave") signifying her ultimate betrayal: "Vindicated, assured, justified in her betrayal (which was called loyalty), smooth of brow, having deposited in triplicate upon foolscap the whole of herself, she sat and smiled. Nothing was left" (316). Meanwhile, gold teeth, fashionable with Asian women, are presented as symbols of a new pan-Asian cultural unity:

Gold teeth, so fashionable now at factory level. Twenty years ago they had been the fashion among the wealthy Asian bourgeoisie (only at that time they had been called Asiatics, not Asians, and made to keep their place, while now Raffles Hotel was full of them every night, and even the Tanglin Club had its one night a week for Asians). (252)

Thus, domestic markers of taste are mobilized to signify the readiness of the Malayan elite to occupy their own place in a more dynamic Asian cultural order. They also portray the British as outsiders, increasingly irrelevant and oblivious to eastern sensitivities:

Asians now spoke of themselves as *we-Asians*, as if Asia were an entity [ ... ] and all these countries were changing, changing, running the centuries into days, hurrying and scrambling forward, at a breathless speed which left European prejudices and platitudes about them as far behind as the buggy horse was left panting after a jet plane. Somehow Europe appeared so staid, stay-behind, and unimaginative beside this surging exaltation of Asia. (252–253)

Interestingly, these symbols of a newfound Asian confidence draw on western markers of social distinction, indicating that Han is again working within an existing literary tradition, spanning both the metropolitan and colonial context.

In *The Flying Fox*, McMinnies employs similar images of domesticity to portray post-war Malaya as a diminished colonial society, the locus of reduced individual ambitions and an exhausted imperial ideology. Decay and mediocrity characterize the mainstays of social life: the Club with “the seedy air of a NAAFI canteen” (McMinnies [1956] 1962, 33), its Ladies’ Room “a vault lit by a single bulb” (38), and the swimming pool “covered by thick scum” (109). Meanwhile, the colonial home is a run-down place, which no longer projects the image of British civilization:

He glanced round the Rest House bedroom. After three months he himself had become accustomed to the squalor, but now it occurred to him that the setting of their re-union could scarcely be said to wear the trappings of luxury or the glamour of the East. Plaster peeled from the walls, grey mounds of mosquito nets heaped over twin iron bedsteads, between the beds a night table with a jerry-pot, a lamp with a naked bulb, two chunky ash-trays advertising a brand of lager, and in one corner a huge black almeirah from which, when opened, there whirled a cloud of insects. (11)

Replacing the heroic ideals of the protagonists of earlier imperial novels with the more ordinary pecuniary drivers of those seeking to make a career in post-war Malaya – “[c]learly few men over thirty would accept a three-year contract in a bandit-ridden outpost of Empire without a very good reason” (McMinnies [1956] 1962, 217) – McMinnies removes any remnants of exotic romanticism in her presentation of their wives: “[l]ittle lakes of sweat formed in the pits under the eyes, a gentle stream flowed between the breasts of the women and down their legs; lipstick flaked off and faces were ghastly under a film of grease” (45). Yet while the women in *The Flying Fox* are keenly aware that the glamour of colonial life is a thing of the past, McMinnies employs the ironic voice of her third-person narrator to dismiss their support for the benevolent paternalism their husbands bring to their colonial jobs:

They sat up on the alert, adjusting their varying expressions to a universal one of enthusiasm, adopting too, an identical manner, a blend of fourth-form skittishness and prefectorial heartiness, which, understandably, became some better than others. This was the approach, no mere whim of fashion, but a cut-and-dried policy by which their husbands stood to gain or lose, which Vivian Lucas, in his rare moment of flippancy called the “New Look.” (54)

The women’s outdated racist views are further exposed through McMinnies’s irony: “You get a lot of Asians here Saturday night, so Maud and me, we always try and turn up

Saturdays. It's a great help, my hubby says – makes them feel at home" (39). At the same time, the novel's dialogism generates limited challenge, with the Asian protagonists merely dismissing the "New Look" as "an uncomfortable fashion for us all" (121) and "a frippery" (166).

The unadorned details of colonial domesticity also function as markers of social rank. In common with the metropolitan middlebrow novel, McMinnies's descriptions of fashion and domesticity convey a specific middle-class anxiety about its own status in relation to the lower middle classes, often treating them with scorn and "reviling the smug contentment and small horizons of the new suburbs" (Humble 2001, 80–81). In the colonial context, these class markers acquire additional meaning, as the taste for cheap consumer goods is associated with imperial decline – "Tinned food doesn't worry them, and they're happy with wine, red or white, as supplied by Wong" (McMinnies [1956] 1962, 229) – and suburban England now trumps the allure of the empire:

Suddenly she felt homesick; for Sainsbury's on a Saturday, shopping baskets digging into you and fowls laid out plucked on the counter – not cackling their heads off like in the market here; she had never had to draw a fowl before, disgusting. And proper crabs, sterilised scarlet, gleaming like berries through a frosty morning on the slab outside Mac Fisheries – not like here where you peered into a stinking crate and the Chinaman tickled the awful black shapes crawling inside. (194)

Hence, in common with Han, McMinnies uses domestic themes from the metropolitan middlebrow to express the loss of imperial confidence and the diminished ambitions of those serving in post-war Malaya. In doing so, she rejects the ideologically constructed image of the benevolent colonial administrator, who is "preparing" the colonized for independence, even though elements of colonial discourse persist in her narrative. Both Han and McMinnies also tap into mid-century western anxieties about social class and mobility, exposing how differences in taste and behaviours prompt moral judgements. The comparison with McMinnies's text further shows how Han expands the use of the domestic to bring to life the societal tensions that are specific to the Malayan context, revealing both Asian sensitivities and imported western values, whilst also signifying the ambitions of the Malayan elite. In doing so, Han sketches a more complex picture of Malayan society during the Emergency than McMinnies.

## Conclusion

This article has made the case for reading . . . *and the Rain my Drink* and *The Flying Fox* as middlebrow novels, on account of their didactic function and their adoption of literary devices familiar to readers of metropolitan middlebrow fiction. As such, the two novels illustrate the middlebrow's potential to conduct a political debate, whilst maintaining a careful balance between meeting and unsettling readers' expectations. The subject of middlebrow scholarship, these narrative strategies also featured in western newspaper reviews and give us an indication of those aspects of the novels that would have resonated with contemporary readers.

In the first instance, the reviewers confirm the importance of the didactic function of the middlebrow novel. They point to Han Suyin's ability to provide "a shocking and absorbing picture of many aspects of contemporary Malayan life" (*The Sunday Times*,

July 29, 1956) and to illuminate “an entanglement of barely comprehensible politics, all seen through a drifting mist of quarter-knowledge” (*Daily Telegraph*, August 3, 1956). Likewise, they comment on McMinnies’s “considerable personal knowledge” (*The Times Literary Supplement*, April 13, 1956) and “quality of assurance” in her account of “the tense and cosmopolitan Malayan community suffering under the strain of bandits, corruption, and climate” (*Manchester Guardian*, March 20, 1956). But they also draw attention to the potential of the middlebrow novel to challenge the status quo, with one reviewer commenting on Han’s portrayal of “the chaos of murdering idealisms, half-hearted liberalism and grotesque, inevitable injustice in the fullness of life” (*Illustrated London News*, October 6, 1956) and another on McMinnies’s “searching, scathing investigation into the kind of people who govern post-war Malaya” (*The Times*, March 15, 1956).

Reviewers in the western press further highlight the authors’ sympathy for the Malayan people. McMinnies is said to possess an “unusually thorough knowledge of the world and unusually broad humane, and yet critical sympathies” (*Manchester Guardian*, March 20, 1956), while Han is presented as writing with a “rarer kind of impartiality which comes from insight into, and warm sympathy with, all manner of diverse and conflicting human beings” (*Daily Telegraph*, August 3, 1956). McMinnies’s “humanity” and Han’s “warm sympathy” fit within Christina Klein’s conception of the middlebrow as affirming “the eternal, universal values that united all human beings across time and space” (2003, 65).

In conclusion, Han and McMinnies employ narrative elements associated with the metropolitan middlebrow, alongside exotic imagery, familiar from an earlier imperial tradition, to engage with the complex politics of decolonization, whilst also attending to anxieties of post-war readers about social class and cultural taste. They set their Emergency narratives within a fictional setting that is familiar and reassuring, as well as strange and unsettling. Both authors offer a critical, if at times ambivalent, view on Britain’s politics of decolonization, even as they express different political sensitivities. Thus illustrating the flexibility of the middlebrow as a literary category, Han and McMinnies succeed in making “accepted and universal what is strange and esoteric”, bringing the familiar world of the middlebrow reader into an unfamiliar colonial arena.

## Notes

1. The “minimal impact” hypothesis has been contested (see e.g. Ward 2001).
2. In this Special Issue, Alex Tickell studies Han’s use of middlebrow romance tropes in the context of this integrationist Cold War orientalism.
3. Likewise, for the Singaporean author Chin (1961), the jungle is both the locale of communist anti-colonial resistance and a political metaphor.
4. Tickell (2019) detects a modernist influence in Han’s descriptions of the “nightmarish ironies of the conflict” (434), suggesting a further link with western literature.
5. This description is reminiscent of E.M. Forster’s ([1924] 2005) *A Passage to India* and George Orwell’s ([1934] 2009) *Burmese Days*. Anthony Burgess’s *Time for a Tiger* features similar scenes of squalor. The first volume of *The Malayan Trilogy* (Burgess 2000), it was published in October 1956; that is, after Han’s and McMinnies’s novels.



6. For example, readers are likely to have related the exotic to W. Somerset Maugham's Far Eastern stories. Han herself refers to Malayan writing "in the Somerset Maugham tradition" as comprising books "about white people who happen to be in Malaya" (1957, 21). See also Ina Zhang's article in this Special Issue.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Anne Wetherilt* is a PhD student at the Open University. Her thesis examines the work of British women writers, their fictional response to decolonization, and their location in the broader context of post-war middlebrow fiction.

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